

Community Assistantship Program

Northfield Downtown Development Corporation Report

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Northfield Downtown Development Corporation Report

Conducted on behalf of
Northfield Downtown Development Corporation

Prepared by
Michael Moore, Graduate Research Assistant,
University of Minnesota
May 2001

CAP Report 025

CURA RESOURCE COLLECTION

**Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
University of Minnesota
330 Humphrey Center**

May, 2001

To: Jan Joannides, Director
Community Assistantship Program

From: Michael D. Moore, Researcher
Community Assistantship Program

Subject: Northfield Downtown Development Corporation (NDDC) – Report

My first contact with Northfield was in mid-October of 2000. Initially, I sent my resume and a brief letter of introduction, via fax, to Dr. Bardwell Smith. Dr. Smith was listed as the contact person – after he had a chance to review my information we talked briefly on the phone and agreed that it would be worthwhile to meet face-to-face and also to visit with other members of the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation Founding Board of Directors. After an interview and a tour of the community it was mutually agreed that I would become the Research Assistant for the NDDC.

The Northfield Downtown Development Corporation was, and for that matter is still relatively young. For example, the General Principles of the organization were written as recently as May 31, 2000. With no staff and operating purely as a volunteer group the NDDC was striving to find its future – funding, staff, etc. I must admit I was embraced as the first staff person and made to feel at home and, more importantly, needed.

Dr. Smith quickly brought me up to speed on the reasons for the creation of the NDDC, its possible relationship with other entities within the City – such as the Community Development Office, Economic Development Authority, the Northfield City Planning

Commission and the Chamber of Commerce, among other groups. I was introduced to the NDDC Steering Committee (a larger committee that was still serving as the lead advisory group for the Board of Director's). I was also introduced to the NDDC Research and Recruitment Committee. This is the group that I was assigned too. Kindly enough they agreed to meet at a time when it best met my schedule – keeping in mind that in order for me to work in Northfield required a trip of over 375 miles (one way) from my home in Fertile, Mn. and the fact that I was a student at the Humphrey Institute as well.

Northfield was a great discovery to me. I found a vibrant, lively community that was struggling with a far different set of problems that what I was used too. Northfield, as an entity is being confronted with the problem of growth, as opposed to my background of simple survival. The communities that I work with in northwestern Minnesota are struggling to stay alive and only wish for the problem of growth. Northfield has all the attributes. It is a beautiful community, nestled on the banks and the valley of the Cannon River, located just minutes from downtown Minneapolis. I found a community that has a strong and diverse economy, built on four strong pillars. First the colleges, each is one of the finest institutions to be found anywhere and Northfield has two. Few communities in the Midwest can boast such a circumstance. There is a strong manufacturing – commercial base with Malt O'Meal and others. Plus Northfield has a strong farming base and also boasts a vibrant tourism industry. There is no doubt that it has been discovered and people are flocking there to settle and raise their families. According to the Community Development's Office Newsletter for October they had already set a record

for building permits for the year (1000 +) and there was still two months left. Real estate sales are booming and prices are soaring.

Growth in Northfield's case also meant the development of "big box" retail. The community was still reeling from the internal battle it had over the development of a large Target store south of town along State highway # 3. That issue was at the forefront of the city council and mayoral races taking place last fall. In fact, many thought the creation of the NDDC was in direct relation to the opening of Target. And, in many ways it was. But based on my investigation the creation of the NDDC, was also in relation to what many people thought - that the downtown had changed over the past few years. The thinking is "There are fewer essential services and products available and many more gift and boutique type stores." Some merchants complained that there was less foot traffic - with more and more people shopping in the large malls just a few miles to the north. The talk in town is that more big boxes are coming and the question is, "what will become of the downtown?" Hence, the NDDC was created.

I found it particularly interesting that none of the founding members of the NDDC had any retail background. They were, however, a diverse group, but except for ownership of properties and possible need for professional services none of them had a vested interest in keeping downtown Northfield a viable location. I am not sure that I found the diversity a strong point or not. Personal interest is still a point of contention and was expressed by some downtown merchants, especially those that rented from influential NDDC members. However, it was hard to refute the concept that their heart was in the right

place. They were working hard to preserve the very essence of Northfield and in my estimation it would be difficult to be negative about a group like that.

Members of the Research and Recruitment Committee (R & R Committee) expressed an interest in finding out what other communities of similar size are doing and how they are relating to the explosion of the “big box” retail. Plus it was decided to find out what the downtown Northfield merchants themselves were thinking. There was also an interest expressed in forming some type of downtown merchants association as an adjunct to the NDDC. As a result my tasks were defined: to explore other communities, determine if they have a downtown development corporation and what is its function, its mission, how are they funded, who is involved and how do they relate to other community organizations. The second task was to develop a survey instrument and then survey the downtown merchants. In addition I was given the responsibility of helping with an event planned for December 5th – a community presentation about the redevelopment of St. Paul’s “Lowertown” by Weming Lu the President of the Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation.

Upon reporting to the larger NDDC Steering Committee I found that the local Chamber of Commerce had conducted a retail survey not too long ago. As a result, how would the survey that I was charged with be different? I conducted research on what the Chamber of Commerce had done and developed a draft survey instrument. Dr. Bardwell Smith, who as a former professor and dean at Carlton College had an extensive background in

survey development, worked with me. Dr. Smith had, also become my Supervisor and was also serving as my source for information and inspiration in the project. The various drafts served as a source for agenda items as each draft produced more and different points of view as to what should be researched, who should be surveyed and how. Initially it was a solid exercise, it created dialogue that was necessary to the R & R's role and it provided a small forum for people to vent their frustrations with the existing community organizations.

One very clear point developed for me during this process. I discovered that Northfield was a very sophisticated community. Committees, subcommittees and meetings are the norm in conducting business in Northfield. Everyone wants to be involved and the NDDC was trying hard to tell its story. Time and time again it was reported that people had not heard about the NDDC and if they had they were unsure how its mission was different from other organizations or they were unsure as to what the group did at all. I found those reports unsettling since the NDDC was during the course of October, November and December repeatedly in the newspaper, on the radio and if not in the media was handing out material directly to every downtown merchant. Plus during those months they sponsored or co-sponsored several key community events. In addition and much to my surprise I was featured in an article in the Northfield News (see attached).

As the year ended the NDDC was going through an interesting process. They had been funded by the Northfield EDA and now had a source of operating capital. The Board advertised and decided to hire an interim executive director. Actually two staff people

were hired, each with very different purposes but, with local backgrounds. With staff on board the dynamics of the situation changed. The focus changed from a volunteer driven group to an executive director driven group. It was a necessity given the tasks that the NDDC had developed for itself. The task of supervision now passed to one of the executive directors.

Through his direction the final survey instrument was developed and a course of action was decided upon for delivery and pick-up, plus analysis. The months of February, March and April were devoted to completing the survey project. The instrument and the results are attached. Other members of the R & R Committee were given the task of investigating other communities, much like what I had done for Grand Rapids, Fergus Falls and Willmar. Those reports are also attached. It was also decided that the NDDC would host a community forum inviting other communities to come and discuss what their downtowns are doing to stay active and vibrant. Several dates were set with the final date of May 15th established. I was given the task of obtaining contact names, addresses, etc. That was accomplished and with that it ended my tenure with Northfield.

Acknowledgement/Disclaimer:

May, 2001

The community Assistantship Program (CAP) supported the work of the author of this report but has not reviewed it for publication. The content is solely the responsibility of the author and is not necessarily endorsed by CAP.

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Please send nominees to BARDWELL SMITH
<bsmith@carleton.edu> no later than Nov. 8.
Please write a few lines about the person(s) you nominate.

Reflections of the NDDC Nominating Committee

Essential to our discussion was agreement about the kinds of people we should be considering for membership to the NDDC's Board of Directors. While the specific qualities we mentioned are not simple to spot and while they clearly come in all kinds of shapes and forms, they are basic to how members of a Board of Directors might work together, cooperatively and imaginatively, on issues which will be complex and sometimes contentious. The Board's ongoing task will be to engage, along with a variety of other groups, in helping to strengthen the downtown area of Northfield. We are seeking persons who have no particular axe to grind--of a personal, professional, or ideological nature. In a positive sense, the qualities we have so far identified would include:

- (1) an ability to work together effectively and to engage with other persons in discussions about what constitutes a healthy, economically viable, interesting, attractive, and diverse downtown area;
- (2) an ability and willingness to listen to other points of view and at the same time to make decisions based upon reasonable consensus;
- (3) a commitment to the vision and mission of the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation as stated in the General Principles below;
- (4) a breadth of vision about the future of Northfield, including the relationship of the downtown area to the City as a whole and the larger region of which it is a part.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The purpose of the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation (NDDC) is to strengthen the vitality of the downtown area, which may be defined as the central business district, and to serve as an active partner in promoting, marketing, and developing business in this area. Toward this goal successful development of the downtown area will result in attracting a number of magnets for all kinds of interests.

Basic to the NDDC's function is to take part in identifying central issues and objectives and to assist the City of Northfield along with other organizations in the process of revitalization of the downtown area. Its intent is to stimulate the activities of groups already engaged in planning and development, to foster regular consultation between them, and to initiate new ventures that would employ the imagination and best ideas of the citizens as a whole.

Northfield is composed of a rich diversity of influences. Its proximity to the Twin Cities, its historic origins and architectural richness, its small town atmosphere, its two nationally known colleges, and its pleasant environmental setting contribute

to its being an unusually fine place in which to live, work, raise children, and enjoy retirement. To take advantage of and promote Northfield's special identity, a viable downtown center is essential. Among the objectives of responsible development is a sustained respect for the interplay between the many historical, cultural, educational, economic and environmental factors which contribute to the wealth of the Northfield community.

With these things in mind, the Vision and Mission of the NDDC may be summarized as follows:

VISION STATEMENT OF THE NDDC:

To maintain a viable, active, user-friendly central business district from morning to evening consisting of attractive facilities for the following purposes: residential, recreational, retail, offices, services, and eating establishments supported by local, visitor, and tourist trade.

MISSION STATEMENT OF THE NDDC:

To create growth and quality development in downtown Northfield through a process of cooperation, collaboration, and coordination with various public and private groups while maintaining appropriate density and an aesthetically attractive and historical character.

Succinctly put, the NDDC's purposes are:

- * To promote the vitality and development of downtown Northfield in economic, social and public relations ways.
- * To participate collaboratively with the EDA, the City Council, the Planning Commission, the Chamber of Commerce, and other agencies in ways that seek to build consensus.
- * To provide a wider perspective to the community by means of research dealing with the development of downtown areas that is available from state, regional, and national sources.
- * To engage in helping to educate the public about the issues that are being discussed by planning and development groups within the City of Northfield so that its citizens may be better informed as they participate in the decision-making process.

October 2000

Northfield Downtown Development Corporation:

NDDC Research and Recruitment Committee:

Report on Grand Rapids, Minnesota

The purpose of contacting Grand Rapids was to obtain their reaction to the arrival of the of the "Big Box" retail stores such as Walmart and Target. The second question was whether they have an active downtown association of some type. The third consideration was to find out how the home of the Northfield Mayor Bill Rossman, was doing in the larger scheme of things. The last item was certainly not a priority.

According to the contact in Grand Rapids, Craig Mattson, the downtown retailers – businesspersons were most concerned when Walmart came to town as opposed to when Target opened its doors. It was ten years ago when Walmart came to Grand Rapids. Mattson said that the city and other community groups sponsored seminars on how to combat Walmart. They brought in Ken Stone from Iowa State the national expert on Walmart combat.

Mattson said that it was a paradigm shift in way that local business did business. They focused on advertising the difference and offered service and products that Walmart did not offer. He noted that some businesses did not survive, but those that understood what it was now going to take to succeed are actually doing better than ever before.

Mattson added that Grand Rapids does not have an actual NDDC type organization. He noted that the chamber is strong and so is the City's economic development program. He noted that the biggest problem now for the downtown is parking.



Fourth Quarter Program
November 10, 2000
9am – 1pm

Belle Plaine Public Library
Main Street
Belle Plaine, Minnesota

Hometown Minnesota, Inc.

Agenda

Member Communities

Barnesville Main Street Program

Belle Plaine Main Street Program

Heart of Virginia

Hometown Renville

International Falls Main Street Program

Main Street Wabasha

City of Mankato

Mobilize Montgomery

New Prague Chamber of Commerce

Olivia Economic Development Authority

Plainview West Broadway Restoration Council

Red Wing Main Street Program

Renville County Economic Development

Authority

Spicer Economic Development Authority

Waseca Chamber of Commerce

Willmar Main Street District

For additional information, please contact:

Tim Griffin, Executive Director

Hometown Minnesota, Inc.

25 University Avenue SE, Suite 403

Minneapolis, MN 55414

612.623.4000

e-mail tgriffin@bikoassociates.com

9:00

Welcome & Announcements

Sandy Johnson,

Belle Plaine Main Street

Ryan Kragerud, Hometown Minnesota

9:30

Brian Ross & Suzanne Rhees

Economics of Smart Growth Workshop

This workshop is made possible

through a grant from the Office of

Environmental Assistance.

11:00

Break

1:00

Adjourn:

Hometown Board Meeting following
workshop.

Next Quarterly Meeting:

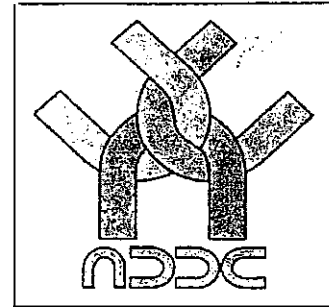
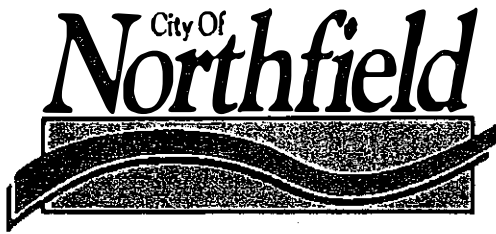
Montgomery "Getting Organized"

Become an Affiliate Member
for \$150 annually. Or, if you
haven't, please renew your
membership today.

Thank you to Sandy Johnson, and the
Belle Plaine Main Street Program for
hosting this quarterly meeting!

Hometown online

www.hometownmn.org



November 20, 2000

Dear Northfield Area Citizen:

We invite you to participate in two FREE forums that will set the stage for the next phase of development in downtown Northfield.

**Wednesday, November 29, 7-9 PM, Northfield Arts Guild, 304 Division Street
FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY: REDISCOVERING DOWNTOWN NORTHFIELD**

This open forum will explore growth of Northfield's downtown west of the Cannon. How should the riverside site north of Second Street be redeveloped? What about Walgreens and the grain elevator? How can the west side become an integral part of downtown? What do the development guidelines adopted in 1999 really mean? How will the proposed Highway 3 and 19 reconstruction affect planning? The ideas and opportunities you identify may influence the riverside project and others in the future.

This event is co-sponsored by the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation, Design Advisory Board, Economic Development Authority, Heritage Preservation Commission, Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Northfield Arts Guild, Northfield Historical Society and the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board.

**Tuesday, December 5, 7 PM, Grand Theater, Fourth and Washington
PRESENTATION BY WEIMING LU, PRESIDENT
ST. PAUL LOWERTOWN REDEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

With lively commentary and video illustrations, Mr. Lu will tell the exciting story of a successful, 22 year effort to revive the east side of downtown St. Paul as a vibrant, mixed use neighborhood. Downtown Northfield's scale is obviously different, but many of the challenges are similar. City and NDDC representatives were inspired, during a summer tour, by the insight, imagination and collaborative action employed by the Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation and its partners. We, and representatives of many other cities, believe that—whatever you do—this is how to do it. Mr. Lu will answer questions following his presentation.

This event is cosponsored by the City of Northfield and the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation.

We look forward to having you join us, members of the City Council and City advisory boards and commissions, downtown business and property owners, NDDC committee members and other interested citizens at these two events. Mark you calendars. We'll bring the refreshments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William Rossman".

William Rossman
Mayor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brett Reese".

Brett Reese
NDDC President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Keith Covey".

Keith Covey
Mayor Elect

January 16, 2001

Northfield Downtown Development Corporation:

Research and Recruitment Committee:

Report on Fergus Falls, Mn.

Fergus Falls was one of the lead Minnesota communities for the national program called "Mainstreet Minnesota". For Fergus Falls the program was developed in the mid 1980's in response to the building of a mall on the outskirts of town – close to Interstate 94. With the advent of the Mainstreet program, a formalized attempt was made to redevelop and maintain the Fergus Falls downtown.

The Mainstreet program was much like the NDDC. It was formalized, its mission was very similar and it was created in response to construction of larger retail space being created on the edge of town. Many downtown retail stores re-located at the mall. According to John Generaux, Community Development Director, the remaining retail businesses downtown did not respond fast enough. As a result, there were high vacancy rates for several years. Even the downtown was suffering the Mall suffered too. The consensus was that the Mall did not enough stores and that the West Acres Mall in Fargo, North Dakota was too close.

The downtown began to do things differently. Lead by the Mainstreet program the area looked for a new mix. It became a financial and service center. Along with unique shopping, including antiques and book stores. It seems to be much like Northfield in that respect.

The national Mainstreet program has now become Hometown Minnesota, but the same problem of not enough funding remains. Fergus Falls has an active Chamber Office plus a strong city initiative for economic development. The downtown development work is not a stand-alone organization anymore simply because of the cost.

Question 4a. Do you find the downtown area a vibrant and lively place culturally?(recreation & arts)?

Strongly agree	21%
Generally agree	44.7%
Generally disagree	23.7%
Strongly disagree	2.6%
No opinion	5.2%

Question 4d. Does your business benefit from cultural events downtown?

Yes	39.4%
No	42.1%
No opinion	18.5%

Question 6b. Check any of the following that you regard as a significantly negative factor in the downtown:

Insufficient or inadequate parking space in or near the downtown	87%
Inadequate number of retail stores to meet basic household needs	37%
no family type entertainment in the downtown	30%
lack of attractive family-style apartment units within walking distance from the downtown	18%
Poorly maintained buildings	5%
Poorly maintained streets and sidewalks	29%

Still a center of community, place to see friends and neighbors
 Service businesses, gift shops
 Abundant services, good gathering places, coffee shops and small restaurants
 The old downtown, small town atmosphere
 Historic buildings, great looking, colleges, malt-o-meal, river
 Personal services, unique shops
 When looking for an item I have great luck in Northfield, Nice eating places
 Good looking renovated buildings
 Variety of shops and businesses
 River walk and bridge square
 Banking, post office, food and beverage, municipal liquor store, groceries, library
 Places to eat, places to socialize, places to shop
 Good variety of stores
 Changing and upgrading of retail and entertainment options
 Generally there are lots of people milling around
 Restaurants appear to do well. I'm concerned about other retail though. Pedestrian traffic is down
 Lots of people working down

Comments – Strongly or Generally disagree

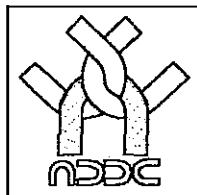
I'm old enough to remember when Northfield was busier, had more "esprit de corps" and was inhabited by optimistic merchants
 The town citizens do not support the downtown. They assume that there are only gift stores downtown and aren't aware of the activities and new stores. They assume it is faster and cheaper to go to the cities.
 It's amazing how many businesses go out of business. The residents must be educated on how important their support is to small businesses. We can't survive without it.
 Don't see many employment opportunities or strong money making businesses
 On a day-to-day basis, economically downtown is suffering
 Times have changed. Well run businesses are no longer here and some of those goods and services have not been replaced by others willing to invest in Northfield

Question 3a. Do you consider downtown Northfield a vibrant and lively place socially?

Strongly agree	5.2%
Generally agree	66%
Generally disagree	21%
Strongly disagree	2.6%
No opinion	5.2%

Question 3d. Does your business benefit from social events downtown?

Yes	45%
No	37%
No opinion	18%



Northfield Downtown Development Corporation

The Northfield Downtown Development Corporation has as its primary concern the well-being and vitality of the downtown area. The NDDC is therefore interested in assessing what issues are the most important ones to you as retailers in the central business district and how you gauge the downtown area as a center of economic, social, and cultural life in this community. People often mention the following features of Northfield as attractive aspects of the downtown area: its park-like setting along the river; its historically unique and picturesque architecture; the presence of many eating and drinking establishments; and the existence of an adequate spectrum of retail merchandise. It is our intent in this survey to go beyond general impressions and to seek more specific responses from those who actually work in the downtown.

We would appreciate your reply to the following questions.

1. When you think of downtown Northfield, what first comes to your mind?

2a. Do you consider downtown Northfield a vibrant and lively place economically?

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Generally agree ☐ Generally disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

2b. If you strongly or generally agree, list some of the main attractions in your view:

2c. If you generally or strongly disagree, what are your reasons for this view?

3a. Do you consider downtown Northfield a vibrant and lively place socially?

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Generally agree ☐ Generally disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

3b. If you strongly or generally agree, list some of the main attractions in your view.

3c. If you generally or strongly disagree, what are your reasons for this view?

3d. Does your business benefit from social events downtown? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Why/Why not?

4a. Do you find the downtown area a vibrant and lively place culturally (recreation & the arts)?

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Generally agree ☐ Generally disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

4b. If you strongly or generally agree, list some of the main attractions in your view:

4c. If you generally or strongly disagree, what are your reasons for this view?

4d. Does your business benefit from cultural events downtown? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Why/Why not?

5. What kinds of events in downtown Northfield does your business benefit from?

6a. What is missing in the downtown area that would make it more socially alive, culturally interesting, or strong economically?

6b. Check any of the following that you regard as a significantly negative factor in the downtown:

- ☐ Insufficient or inadequate parking space in or near the downtown
- ☐ Inadequate number of retail stores to meet basic household needs
- ☐ no family type entertainment in the downtown
- ☐ lack of attractive family-style apartment units within walking distance from the downtown
- ☐ Poorly maintained buildings
- ☐ Poorly maintained streets and sidewalks
- ☐ Other (list other factors that you regard as important)

6c. Because a vibrant and interesting downtown can stimulate and enhance the well-being of businesses located in this area, what would be your suggestions as to the kinds of retail establishments which we presently lack that would add to the mix of what we already have?

7. From your perspective, what would help to make the central business district more successful?

a) From the retailer's perspective:

b) From the local shopper's perspective:

c) From the outside visitor's perspective:

8. If you have some dreams for downtown Northfield for the next ten years, mention those which are highest on your list.

9. What other questions should we have asked?

10. What is your understanding of the mission of the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation?

Thank you for contributing your responses to these questions. They are important in our effort to identify how those who are engaged in retail business in Northfield regard the central business district.

Completed surveys will be picked up on February 20, 2001

NDDC Survey Results – 38 returned surveys

Responses to Question 1

When you think of downtown Northfield, what first comes to your mind?

Charming ✓✓✓

Lack of parking for customers and shopkeepers ✓✓✓✓✓

Interesting and fun place to do business

Excellent specialty shops, oriented to tourism, coffee shops and local gathering spots

College town

Small town service

Historic looking ✓✓✓✓✓

Busy

Draws tourists but needs more parking

Great looking old buildings ✓✓✓

Quaint ✓✓✓✓✓

I worry about its future

Owner operated businesses ✓✓

Unique shops ✓✓✓✓✓

Nice friendly place to shop and visit ✓✓✓

Declining

In transition – nice building and nice stores but few people know this

It's a place of work

Norman Rockwell painting – small town America

The consistent pedestrian activities, vehicles and traffic, busy days-quiet nights, convenience of services

Busy, social, fun place to be

Home

The Cannon river

Cute stores but no substance

Seeing friends and people. Places to eat with small retail stores

History✓✓

Gift boutiques

Help!

Question 2a. Do you consider downtown Northfield a vibrant and lively place economically?

Strongly agree 10.5%

Generally agree 50%

Generally disagree 26.3%

Strongly disagree 5.3%

No opinion 7.9%

Comments – Strongly or Generally agree

People enjoy walking to lunch and the shops, coffee places

Northfield is still alive with people

Bridge square, hotel, Econofoods